

Last Stop

By Kyle Donahoe

The wind blew across the hot desert road as I sat on a bench near the seemingly empty gas station. It was more or less a crap hole, much like my life, really.

I sighed as I adjusted myself on the bench, a dark roof above my seat being the only thing keeping me in the shade. A backpack full of various things laid beside me—it contained things like extra snacks, water, my phone, a charger for the phone, a book or two, and a change of clothes. Oh, and my wallet, containing my ID, credit cards, and a photo of my husband. I shut my eyes, trying not to think about him, even after all that's happened...

"Sir?" I heard someone say, snapping me out of my train of thought. I looked to see who was calling me. It turned out to be one of the gas station employees, a fairly average young woman who seemed out of place, here in the middle of nowhere. "Are you alright?" she asked me, frowning. "You've been here for quite a long time, and—"

I just smiled and nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine," I said. A lie. She didn't know better, and just smiled back, nodding at me before heading back into the station.

Many minutes passed by, and at that point, I think I fell asleep. Then, I found myself woken up by the sound of tires squealing coming from a truck. I looked up to see a large delivery semi-truck parked on the road before me. And, hopping out from it, was a tall, rough-around-the-edges woman in trucker attire — visored cap, t-shirt with some company's logo on it, jeans, and boots. A cigarette was visible in her mouth as well. As she came out, she didn't seem to notice me, as she went straight for the store at the gas station.

She didn't notice me, either, when she came back out. I had been looking at her truck the whole time, and during that, I realized that I could change my current predicament. When she went to get back into her vehicle, I took that moment to call out, "Hey."

The lady stopped, turning her head to look at me. "Howdy," she said, in a noticeably Southern drawl — probably Texan, I figured. "Need somethin', honey?"

"Uh...well, I need to get somewhere, and I don't really have much in the way of transport," I answered. She took the cigarette out of her mouth and blew smoke to the side, while remaining silent. "I'm not gonna be a nuisance, I promise. I just have the clothes on my back, and the stuff in my pack over there," I added, pointing at the backpack on the bench.

She took a drag from her cigarette, and puffed again, before looking at me and speaking, "What's your destination? I'm headin' to the city to deliver all this gear and crap." She made a gesture at the cargo within the truck's trailer.

"That'd be where I'm going, too," I replied, a smile tugging at my lips. I saw her put a hand to her chin, thinking apparently.

“Eh, I got space. Hop in, honey,” she said suddenly, climbing in. Not one to dawdle, I quickly followed suit, getting in the passenger seat and putting my backpack in the legroom that was available. As the door was closed, the truck roared to life, and soon, we were off.

“Name’s Clementine, honey,” the driver said as we went, extending a hand to me. “Yours?”

I was silent for a moment, before I managed to find my voice. “Lee,” I said softly, accepting the handshake with a smile. She seemed to return it, before focusing on the road. The window on her side was open so her cigarette smoke wasn’t contained in the cabin.

“Alright, Lee. Tell me somethin’. There a reason you’re going this way too?”

I paused, before deciding to answer, thinking of the photo in my bag. “I’ve got someone to make amends to. Someone I could really like in my life again.”

Clementine just smiled at me. “You sound alright to me, then. Got a few hours to go before we get there, by the way.”

I relaxed and nodded, a smile on on my face.

A few hours passed, and though it was mostly quiet, Clementine and I did engage in a bit of chatter. We talked about life in general, things we do outside our jobs, that kind of thing. And then, she asked me *that* question. “Who’s this person you wanna make amends to, anyway?”

Well, shit. Guess I was too hopeful to think she wouldn’t pry. Still...she was nice enough to give me a ride. She deserved to know at least something.

“This one’s a doozy, but here we go...”

A few minutes later. Clementine’s eyes were wide like dinner plates as I finished my story, and I looked away in shame. I was ready to get blasted for my screw-up, I knew I deserved it...

Instead of tearing me a new one, her hand laid upon my shoulder. I turned back to see her giving me a sympathetic smile.

“Lee, darlin’. I can see how crushed y’are after all that. If I were any other person, I’d probably be yellin’ your ear off. But I know an atoner when I see one,” she said kindly.

“You...you really think that?” I breathed, stunned.

“Course I do. Stuff like that ain’t somethin’ I can ignore. You screwed up, you wanna fix it. That’s somethin’ I can admire.”

Almost immediately after she said that, a hell of a goofy grin spread on my face. “Well, that’s...that’s really comforting, Clementine. Thanks.”

“Sure thing, hon,” the trucker replied. “In fact, I can drop you off right in front of this Kenny’s place if you want.”

“That’d be perfect,” I replied, nodding with enthusiasm. An hour or so later, I had arrived at my destination. A big, shiny apartment complex, which looked quite welcoming and warm to potential

arrivals. I checked my watch, seeing that it was currently 6 PM, on the dot. I turned my head to see Clementine standing there, another cigarette in her mouth.

“Clementine, thank you for bringing me here. Is there anything I can do to repay you? Money, a gift, something?”

She just shrugged. “Nah,” she said, patting me on the back. “Just go get ‘em, tiger. I’ll be waitin’ here for ya.”

My chest warmed with hope, something I had forgotten about the last few days. As I shook Clementine’s hand, I turned back to the apartment doors, and took a breath.

“Okay...I’m home, Kenny,” I said to myself as I walked in.